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WORDS

Stuart Chase in his recent "Tyranny of Words" points out to his own consternation the fact that language is fast loosing its value as a medium of thought communication because individual words no longer convey definite meanings. Any two readers interpret a given writer differently, and neither receives the thought which the writer intended.

Mr. Arnold, discussing what he calls the "Folklore of Capitalism", complains of the inadequacy of our present vocabulary to express current ideas. He feels that understanding by the general public of recent social and economic developments is curtailed and attempts to elucidate are handicapped because of lack of words. It is this dilemma that has caused writers and speakers to "coin" new words as occasion seems to demand, or to attribute to old words new meanings and new applications. As a result we have watched the American language expand, and the standard dictionaries increase in size (and incidentally in price) because of the constantly growing need for new words.

It is my opinion, however, that most of us are deficient in ideas rather than in words--that our expression is limited not so much by lack of available vocabulary, as by a proper conception of what the words individually actually mean. And if the economic and social situation at present is confused, and the thinking of the average American citizen so muddled that he is in doubt as to what theory of government, education, religion-life, he should support and defend, I am inclined to believe, that the fault lies rather in multiplicity of words which cover up and becloud ideas and in the repeated use of stereotyped words whose real intent has been lost and which are, therefore, subject to misinterpretation. The very users of stock phrases

and even simple words often naively believe that they are honest in their interpretation, tho at times it seems that the misinterpretation may be clear to demagogues and pseudo-reformers, and hence utilized for selfish purposes. At any rate, whether by intent or by default, "we, the people" are being led about by words, and all too frequently respond to words, not only in our daily routine but in momentous decisions as well. If I should give title then to the few remarks to be made this afternoon, I would designate that title "Words" and my suggestions will be simple and informal to the extreme.

Let it be clear at the start, that I am not about to launch forth into an academic discussion for the purpose of improving the ability of college students to write class room themes, though it must be confessed that American college men and women are woefully deficient in this respect. Indeed the anxiety I have this afternoon is not one of a literary character at all. But I become more and more concerned over the rather evident fact that the American people--intelligent as we ourselves admit them to be--are accepting words in perverted or extremely false meanings, and allowing these to control ideas. We even map out our life's programs and allign ourselves with definite social, intellectual and religious groups on the basis of false interpretations of currently used words.

Even as Bismarck said of the Holy Roman Empire: "Das Heilige Roemische Reich ist weder heilig noch Roemisch noch reich"--so we might as easily and as truthfully challenge the validity of the meaning of our current phrases and slogans. And to illustrate, examples might almost be chosen at random. It will suffice to select and analyze a very few, chosen from various fields of society. Referring to one such word, let me relate to you a boyhood experience which I will call "The Story of a Sickie Blade".

A generation ago there lived in a rural district an individual known to and respected by all the inhabitants of the neighborhood because of his sound judgment, careful attention to details, and exact mastery of his movements. Among his other accomplishments, Mr. Best had been an expert with the grass scythe and indeed operated as a scythe man in the days of the cradle. But with the advent of more complicated machinery he adopted the new methods and mowed his fields of prairie hay with the mowing machine. His mower was never left out in the weather, his sickle blades were always perfectly oiled and sharpened. One sickle blade in particular was his favorite because of the perfection of its manufactory and the fineness of its steel. For years this sickle blade was his particular pride. But the time came when constant grinding had reduced the edges to such a degree of concaveness that they no longer caught the grass blades. The sickle, therefore, had to be laid aside. It was, however, not junked, but was hung by two nails in the barn and was respected for its former value. On Sunday afternoons when the farmer boys of the neighborhood gathered to discuss the events of the week, their eyes would wonder to Mr. Best's sickle blade and they would recall the years of perfect service which it had rendered.

The philosophy of the present period is different and far more utilitarian. A piece of machinery, however perfect in operation it may have been, is discarded the instant its usefulness is over, and the memory of it is cut off. And, as in the case of machinery, likewise the individual whose period of usefulness has passed, though he himself be living, is looked upon as a derelict and his views discarded. Some civilizations never arrived at this stage. The oldest and wisest sachem of our Indian predecessors was revered because of his experience, maturity and judgment, and his counsel was accepted as

final. In American society of the present all too often the elderly man becomes, in the opinion of those whom he has so faithfully served, a "mossback", a "has been" or whatever derogatory term may be available. Now the "word" I have in mind and which I have used in the preceding paragraph is "respect", the basic meaning of which is "to look back upon." It presupposes accomplishment, experience, past knowledge--not planning, vision, or reform. Respect has to do with the past--not with either present or future. It is not my desire to ask that the younger American citizen should respect necessarily every man who is gray, bald or even bearded, merely because he is gray, bald or bearded, but rather to urge him to consider that years of experience and successful operation and service are sufficient to justify a hearing, and that the best results in any society will be obtained if the energy, ambition, and impulsiveness of the young are properly tempered and held in check by the maturer, even though slower, judgment of the old.

A half generation ago the business world, especially the industrialists, awoke to the fact that "the human element" was a pertinent factor to the success of the firm. It was discovered that happiness, health, and welfare on the part of employees--laboring men, (aside from their social value) resulted in greater profits to the owners. The discovery had great salutary effect: better and safer laboring conditions, physical examinations, hospitalization, doctors and nurses, recreation, education--all at the expense of the firm. Likewise, methods of employment were made more scientific, not merely "hiring and firing," but planned selection became the order of the day--for mutual benefit of employer and employee. A separate function--and later department--was established, and a new word came into vogue - "personnel". Business soon became interested in personnel as a study, and naturally personnel became an object for research in

educational institutions both for employees of business and for students in the schools. Now the word personnel is in daily use, but the needs which gave it birth are concealed in a haze. The ideas awakened today by the word "personnel," and the objectives of students of the subject have become largely abstractions--personnel studies, data sheets, figures, per cents, classifications, tabulations, bureaus, offices, clerks, machines, statistics, tables, graphs--masters' theses. And yet personnel in its concrete signification is essentially related to the personal, to persons, to individuals.

In the field of political practice we are by no means free from a similar trend, and naturally there is greater social danger involved. Austria is being flooded at present with literature announcing the accomplished "freedom", and countless thousands of her citizens are accepting and repeating the slogan of newly acquired "liberty". "Constitution", "polls", "plebiscite", "popular free voting" are current words accepted at full value by the innocent and gullible Europeans who easily confuse the shadow with the substance. The distinction between Fascism in Italy or Germany, and Communism as practiced in Russia, is difficult to see, yet throughout the world nations are actively sympathetic with the one or the other, purely on the strength of word implications which do not exist.

Our own case is far different in degree, but hardly in kind. At the polls we become two major classes--Democrat and Republican. Yet an analysis of the platforms will show slight relationship of either group to the names, and only limited difference between the avowed objectives of both.

Another grouping is in the offing--conservative and liberal. These names would seem to be more definite--for each has an intel-

ligible meaning. Yet both may be fairly labeled misnomers. The present "conservative" is, in the last analysis, an advocate of status quo in American government and economics, and a supporter of a system existant in which he has faith or--a personal interest. The "liberal" is open to the same charge. He is opposed to certain existing policies and favors different methods of control. Yet this is not necessarily liberal. For if liberalism supports the rights of an individual to think and operate freely, it presupposes and must permit like behavior on the part of others who have a different philosophy of life. No greater compliment could be paid an individual than to credit him with liberal-mindedness. But such liberalism must accept its essential counterpart, which is tolerance. Past generations, and other societies as well as our own, have given us frequent examples of so-called "liberal" parties and groups, which were anything but tolerant with the views of equally honest opponents.

Perhaps one of the most commonly used words in the English language today is "progress", and its derivative "progressive" always awakens applause. The individual is indeed fortunate today whose contemporaries label him as "progressive." As a result, we hear much and read often of "progressive" religion, "progressive" government, "progressive" education, and we are prone to feel that to ally ourselves with any movement with the label "progressive" is ipso facto constructively an advance. I should certainly not be complimented or content, were I accused of lacking the desire for progress, or of obstructing progressive methods in any field. But I must insist upon a proper definition and interpretation of the word. Progress must be thought of in terms of its cognates--progression, gradation, graduation, gradual, and means very definitely step by step advance. Safe progress, that is to say, advancement that will not require or necessitate too many

detours or retreats, must necessarily be based upon careful consideration and planning. Progress does not admit of sudden and impulsive movements nor yet a rushing toward a supposed goal. Hasty and unplanned advance in an untried direction is dangerous for the individual--it may become disastrous for a society.

May I, then, recommend to the members of this class, careful consideration of the ideals and purposes of any organization or movement whose objectives may, by intent or through ignorance, be misrepresented by leading words.